

Ethnographic Research on Criminal Careers: Needs, Contributions, and Prospects

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Abstract

Pioneering research on “criminal careers” changed the course of criminology, reviving, and invigorating preexisting strands of inquiry while opening the door for the emergence of the developmental and life-course perspective that has become one of the dominant paradigms in recent criminological research. A persistent concern in this tradition has been the search for mechanisms connecting one stage of life to another. While qualitative methods are ideally suited for discovering and describing these mechanisms, there is far more published research based on quantitative longitudinal data. Calls for more qualitative work have become routine. This article first briefly describes the history of qualitative research on criminal careers and then discusses how a focus on changes in individual offending patterns over time emerged during the inductive theory-building process that produced the book *Getting Paid*, which began life as a comparative community study. Subsequent qualitative work is then discussed, with a focus on studies of desistance from crime. The conclusions address the problems and

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prospects for integrating qualitative and quantitative research, within or across projects, in ways that better connect social processes to life-course outcomes. Seeing how lives are embedded in community context is crucial to this endeavor.

Keywords

communities and crime, developmental theories, criminological theory, causes/correlates, crime

The publication of *Criminal Careers and "Career Criminals"* (CCCCs; Blumstein et al. 1986) galvanized criminological research with its laser-like focus on "the longitudinal sequence of offenses committed by an offender . . ." (Blumstein, Cohen, and Farrington 1988). CCCC opened the door for the emergence of the developmental/life-course perspective that has become one of the dominant paradigms in recent criminological research. The report synthesized previous substantive research findings, presented new ones, rigorously identified existing issues of measurement and analysis, set a paradigm for key elements of criminal careers to be measured, and made influential recommendations for future research. One of the less heeded of those recommendations was that subsequent research "would properly be augmented by ethnographic studies to develop information about group and community influences that might not be elicited in the individual reports" (Blumstein et al. 1986:200).

CCCC's primary recommendation for future research methodology, the longitudinal panel survey, has been heartily embraced, and research based on such studies has dominated the field. While the justifications for this have been ably stated (Blumstein et al. 1988) and amply demonstrated, the ongoing paucity of ethnographic studies taking a developmental/life-course approach has left some gaps in our understanding of the social processes and mechanisms underlying persistence in or desistance from criminal behavior (Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein 2003). These include both intrapsychic processes, which have been studied in some detail (Carlsson 2012; Farrall and Calverly 2006; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Schroeder 2007; M. Hughes 1998; Maruna 2001; Shover 1996; Shover 1985), as well as social processes linking human development, criminal behavior, and social context, which, I would argue, have not been studied as directly or extensively. The mechanisms at the level of group and community remain understudied (Wikström and Sampson 2003).

My book *Getting Paid: Youth Crime and Work in the Inner-City* (GP; Sullivan 1989) has made one direct and frequently cited contribution to our

understanding of the relationship between criminal careers and local community context. In this article, I discuss some historical background of both qualitative and quantitative work on criminal careers; the impact of CCCC on that field; what I believe to be the complementary substantive, theoretical, and methodological contributions of GP to the field; the intellectual roots of GP from which those contributions grew; subsequent ethnographic work connecting local community context and criminal careers; and implications for future research.

How CCCC Changed the Study of Criminal Careers

When CCCC burst upon the world of criminological research in 1986, it was not the first study to deal with its questions of central interest concerning the onset, continuation, severity, and termination of criminal activity in the lives of individuals. Important quantitative work by Glueck and Glueck (1950), Shannon (1986), McCord and McCord (1959), Robins (1966), Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin (1972), and West and Farrington (1973), to cite prominent examples, already provided some basic knowledge of these matters, for example, the basic shape of the age-crime curve (Farrington 1986). These studies were also centrally concerned with identifying reasons for these patterns over time, identifying and weighing various factors that might account for them. On the qualitative side, almost alone in their own little corner, were Clifford Shaw's case studies such as *The Jack-Roller: A Delinquent Boy's Own Story*, classics known by all but used almost universally as valuable "anecdotal" accounts that could illustrate many theories but prove or disprove none (Becker 1966; Bennett 1981; Shaw 1930).

CCCC brought the study of criminal careers to the center of criminological attention by taking a distinctive approach: It focused relentlessly on the search for sequences of criminal acts, with only passing regard for what else might be going on in those lives; it avoided most social theory; and it claimed substantial potential for informing criminal justice decision-making in the interests of improved public safety and efficient use of public resources. Finally, it brought state-of-the-art methodological expertise and data to the task. The report quickly set a methodological bar for all subsequent research while leaving an open field for theory.

Theory, abhorring a vacuum, not only adapted quickly to the new environment but flourished, nourished by, and nourishing in return empirical studies based primarily on longitudinal panel surveys and culminating in the 2012 inauguration of the Division of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology of the American Society of Criminology.

One sort of gap persists, however, and that is the underpopulated ethnographic corner where my book *Getting Paid: Youth Crime and Work in the Inner City* lives (Sullivan 1989). The focus here on GP is undertaken with the more general aim of identifying some problems and prospects for the use of ethnographic methods to study group and community influences on criminal careers.

The Contributions of GP to the Understanding of Criminal Careers

The distinctive contribution of GP is the way that it conjoins the study of communities and crime with the study of human development, using ethnographic methods to get at the nature of group and community influences on criminal careers. The theoretical counterpart to the use of ethnographic methods here is the concept of social organization. GP examines structured patterns of interaction of people in space, not just their attitudes toward their neighbors but what they and their neighbors *do*, with, alongside, or to one another.

GP is about social process. It gets at some mechanisms on the ground. It is a comparative community ethnography with a developmental/life-course emphasis. The comparative part is important and highly unusual, the part of the design that brings out the specificity of local context. Even more fundamental to the research design than the comparative aspect is the general approach known as the extended case method, in which each case is described by situating it both in extended social space and in historical time.

The contrast between approaching the study of poor neighborhoods from the perspective of social disorganization theories (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997; Sampson and Wilson 1995; Shaw and McKay 1942) versus from the perspective of social organization theory is an old one, going back to Shaw and McKay, on the social disorganization side, and, on the social organization side, to William F. Whyte's famous critique at the end of *Street-Corner Society* (Shaw and McKay 1942; Whyte 1943). Whyte's title says it right out. I am in the latter tradition and I learned it in graduate school by reading Whyte and Herbert Gans (Gans 1962, 1967) but also, importantly, from reading the British social anthropologists associated with the University of Manchester who were much in favor with a number of my professors in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University. The senior figure among them was Conrad Arensberg, often credited as a pioneer of ethnographic study in complex societies (Arensberg 1954; Arensberg and Kimball 1972).

I also benefited from frequent contact with Howard S. Becker. Howie reinforced the Manchester school's emphasis on attending to what people *do* together and *how* they do it. Becker's own substantive studies have primarily dealt with various types of careers, including those of marijuana users and jazz musicians (Becker 1963), school teachers (Becker and Carper 1956), and medical students (Becker et al. 1961), analyzing the social contexts in and through which these careers emerge. People make careers for themselves but they do it in interaction with others, and these interactions are patterned at supraindividual levels of collective action and symbolic representation.

Reading and debating the studies produced by the "Manchester School of Anthropology" (aka "Mancunians"; Evens and Handelman 2006) turned out to be valuable preparation for analyzing the field data on youth crime and employment that I gathered in three different neighborhoods of Brooklyn.

The problems I confronted in trying to make sense of youth crime in poor urban neighborhoods bore interesting similarities to those addressed by the Mancunians studying social change in Central and Southern Africa during the 1950s and 1960s. In both cases, the problems involved accounting for highly localized patterns of behavior in low-status communities embedded in larger societal structures of political power and economic organization. For the Mancunians, this meant breaking away from often implicit assumptions that small-scale societies were worlds unto themselves, organized according to primordial and enduring rules of social life. They collected field data at a time when these localities were part of colonial orders being transformed by labor migration, industrialization, and urbanization.

The methodological challenge was to describe dynamic processes of structured social action that recognized both the enduring communal organization of localities and the interactions across the geographical boundaries of those localities with the larger structures of power and economic organization in which they were embedded.

A brief example illustrates the kinds of problems the Mancunians faced, problems that we might describe in current developmental and life-course criminology as those of interactions across life domains (Agnew 2005). Contradictions arose between what people said about patterns of work and marriage in their communities and what ethnographic fieldwork showed they were actually doing (van Velsen 1964). The problem could only be solved by recognizing and incorporating into the analysis recent patterns of structural change in which local villages had become sources of labor migration to the mines of South Africa. The life domain of work changed and affected the life domain of family and household relations.

The Mancunian methodological approach is known as extended case analysis (van Velsen 1967). Working at the case level, the analyst extends the analysis as far as into the nested hierarchical structures of political and economic organization as is needed to make sense of the case (Sullivan 2002). The analysis also includes historical time in order to accommodate patterns of social change (Burawoy 1998).

I was dealing with a problem that was formally the same but that I had to approach from the opposite direction. For me, the problem was high rates of crime in minority neighborhoods. The differences I uncovered in my field data between the shorter periods of criminal involvement among young males in a White, working-class neighborhood and their impoverished African-American and Latino counterparts just a short distance away seemed hard to understand. They all had access to the same public school system and were subject to the same criminal justice system. They were all located in sufficient physical proximity to the same jobs, especially given the easily accessible public transportation system of New York City.

Why were their criminal careers so different? Psychological explanations based on group differences in intelligence or temperament made little sense. I had to account for the fact that the people who lived in those localities experienced social exclusion not just as individuals but as members of their communities. The formal theoretical and methodological problems were how to account for the internal coherence of communities at the same time as their embeddedness in larger structures. By coherence, I do not mean cohesiveness but rather locally specific structuring processes. Feuds and gang wars, to take two much studied examples, happen in particular ways that can be analyzed in structural context (Brown 1979).

When I talked about these things with Arensberg, he pointed me in another direction that I found very helpful, the general systems theory associated with the work of Al Blumstein's long-time colleague Herbert Simon. Arensberg had me read Simon's description of how one can tell time reasonably well with either a sundial or a chronometer—in Arizona. On an ocean-going ship, the sundial will not be very helpful. As long as the subsystem fulfills the function needed by the larger system that subsystem can be organized one way or another without upsetting the larger system (Simon 1973, 1996). When the subsystem fails or ceases to keep the larger system going, then problems arise and there is pressure for change.

I found this a useful way to think about high rates of crime and joblessness in the inner cities. I have elsewhere used a different metaphor, drawn from biological systems, to explicate this same idea. The boundaries of an

inner-city neighborhood function like a semipermeable membrane (Sullivan 2002). Some stuff flows in and out. Other stuff does not. A lot of crime stays in. A lot of jobs stay out.

That was the community part, but it got a lot clearer when joined with a developmental/life-course perspective. I encountered initial barriers in analyzing my data that I was only able to resolve when I made a grounded-theory “discovery” of age-graded patterns within the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). I had not set out with this approach in mind and was almost entirely innocent of contact with developmental psychology or life-course sociology. The emergence of those age-graded patterns in the course of my inductive, theory-building analyses of the comparative field data was, however, not entirely fortuitous. It was set up by the structure of the data collection. I had relied heavily on open-ended, semistructured life history interviews, a technique I had learned from Howie Becker without quite grasping its rationale and power.

Substantively, there were clear differences between the three neighborhood-based groups in the extent and consequences of their criminal behavior. They had all been purposively sampled as “criminally active youth,” but there were clear patterns of both similarity and difference for which the underlying mechanisms were initially opaque. The minority youth, by their late teens, were jobless and much more deeply involved in criminal activity and the criminal justice system. Yet, all three groups looked very similar in many ways. They all started out the same, fighting and committing acts of petty theft; progressed to more systematic involvement in more serious crimes; and then tried to desist.

It was only when I began to code the data by age as well as neighborhood that the story about the link between neighborhood context and desistance from crime that is the central finding of *GP* began to emerge. These youth started out the same but diverged with age. The divergence was related in identifiable ways to the differential articulations of localized populations with the wider labor market, educational system, and criminal justice system within which they were all embedded. The story could not be told without accounting for both developmental/life-course patterns and variation in the community contexts in which these life patterns unfolded. The analyses were particularistic and idiographic. The generalizations were not inferential, based on claims that the three neighborhoods were in some way representative of all neighborhoods, but rather theoretical, demonstrating that specific connections between local context and human development can be systematically demonstrated and the mechanisms involved identified and described (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Changing Times, Changing Communities: Changing Criminal Careers?

If the central theme of *GP*—that neighborhood context affects criminal careers—is correct, then studies connecting neighborhood-level social processes to developmental/life-course processes will continue to be needed as the locality-based forms of social organization we call communities and neighborhoods themselves change. *GP* was written at the front end of the era of mass incarceration, at a time when transitions from school to work and into stable family life could still happen in the late teens for a lot of people. A lot has changed. Yet, while the effects of these structural changes are highly localized (Clear 2007), a lot of the same kinds of neighborhood effects endure and may even have become more pronounced (Sampson 2012). I discuss here a few notable examples of more recent ethnographic work that reflect some of these continuities and changes.

While the comparative ethnographic neighborhood study of criminal careers has not been much replicated, some single-community ethnographies focused on criminal behavior have placed developmental/life-course issues into specific social contexts in the manner of extended case analysis.

Pattillo-McCoy's (1999) study of a middle-class African-American neighborhood demonstrates how semipermeable neighborhood boundaries do, and do not, shape the social networks through which criminal behavior is socialized and organized. People remain "from" somewhere even as they move "to" somewhere else. Neighborhood contexts are also defined by their geographical and temporal externalities.

Two recent studies deal explicitly with the emerging community contexts of human development shaped by the era of mass incarceration, widening social inequality, and modern technologies of surveillance and control. Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) provide a complex portrait of a homeless encampment that, for all its squalor, still comes across as a specific, albeit internally riven, "community." Goffman's study of young fugitives shows how modern techniques of crime control have turned a community against itself when it comes to supporting young people trying to age out of crime (2009, 2014).

Implications for Future Research

A great deal of ongoing research will be needed to make sense of emerging patterns of criminal careers, the developmental and life-course progressions

into, through, and out of criminal activity. To take but two pressing concerns, it is clear that neither a high school diploma nor a marriage ceremony marks the same kind of life-course transition in the same way as was true only a few years ago. The failure to achieve either of these by a certain age has long been associated with a heightened risk for criminal activity, but the mechanisms are changing. A high school diploma today is good mostly as a learner's permit for college education, and marriage has been transformed from a marker of normality to a luxury good enjoyed primarily by those of high social status.

Further, educational achievement and marriage have not only changed at the societal level. They have changed in their differential distribution across community contexts. Life-course transitions have always been deeply embedded in specific community contexts. Both the transitions and the community contexts, however, are changing rapidly. Keeping up with how these two sets of changes interact with one another is going to require a lot of work.

Ethnography is not the only way to go about studying the intersections of individual and community change, but it is a powerful one that has been relatively neglected. As I wrote in *GP*, citing Becker and Carper (1956) and Becker's mentor E. C. Hughes (1971), "The development of all personal careers involves both a practical and a symbolic aspect. Both the practical and the symbolic are developed in social interaction" (Sullivan 1989:242). This includes criminal careers. Longitudinal sequences of offenses committed by offenders occur in community contexts in which both practical lines of action and the symbolic meanings of those lines of action are constructed in social interaction.

The partially bounded systems of social interaction that so powerfully concentrate violent crime and criminal justice intervention in a quite small proportion of local areas in the United States and elsewhere also encapsulate populations that are socially marginalized in terms of life-course transitions such as those from school to work and from being dependent children to being adult partners and parents. Neighborhood effects on crime endure, powerfully (Sampson 2012), and these effects must be studied as they interact across life domains (Agnew 2005); in terms of how neighborhood contexts are in turn constituted by these locally distinctive trajectories (Arensberg 1954, 1961); and from a nested hierarchical perspective that connects local marginalization to global processes that produce, reproduce, and generate new forms of inequality.

Ethnography has an important role to play advancing our knowledge of criminal careers. The extraordinary geographic concentrations of certain

types of crime, particularly violent crime, call for far more attention to local-level social processes than has so far been achieved in the rapidly developing field of developmental and life-course criminology. I would offer the following recommendations for data collection and analysis to further progress along these lines.

1. Collect narrative life-history data about transitions into crime, progressions of involvements in crime, and transitions out of crime.
2. Collect related narrative accounts of other concurrent life-course progressions, especially schooling, employment, intimate partnerships and parenting (including transitions and ruptures), and residential moves and patterns of geographical and community attachment.
3. Analyze the narrative data not just in terms of intrapsychic dynamics but in terms of the hierarchically nested levels of social context (family, neighborhood, regional economy, national polity) within which criminal careers unfold. Use multiple relevant data sources—census data; surveys; and literary, cinematic, and other artistic investigations of changing social context—to situate the case in context and use the case to further illuminate the context.
4. Analyze the ways in which practical lines of action are related to symbolic representations, for example, “GP” as an expression of semantic equivalence of income-generating crime and paid employment, however ironic and contested within the community. Also analyze the irony and the contests in order to situate the case in cultural context. Other recent examples of practical/symbolic nexus would include analyses by Goffman of “clean people” (2014), Harding of “drama” (2010), Miller of “the playa” (2008), and Pattillo of “sweet mothers and gangbangers” (1998).
5. Return to the question of how criminal careers are shaped by social context and in turn reconstitute social context.

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